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## Murder Music: Horror Film Soundtracks Throughout History

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### Recommended Citation

Aragon, Vincent G., "Murder Music: Horror Film Soundtracks Throughout History" (2020). *Capstone Projects and Master's Theses*. 788.

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California State University, Monterey Bay

Murder Music:  
Horror Film Soundtracks Throughout History

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Music and Performing Arts

6 May 2020

## **Abstract**

Horror films often rely heavily on their music to create a tense and frightening experience for their audience, and it is the composer's job to write a score that satisfies that requirement. Throughout film history, the methods composers utilize to achieve that goal differ across time due to various factors including available technology, allotted budget, and the norms and expectations of films at the time. This capstone paper explores the different approaches composers employed in writing horror soundtracks from the early 20th century to the modern-day, noting any significant shifts and common themes found in the music of popular horror themes. By examining several notable films in the horror genre, it can ultimately be seen that composers of horror films often emulate successes of the past, creating a number of tropes common in horror cinema. It is the way these musical tropes are utilized and subverted that establishes a sense of fear in the audience.

## **Murder Music**

For decades horror films have terrified crowds of anxious moviegoers with macabre tales of masked serial killers, man-eating sharks, and otherworldly apparitions. The horror genre has been a part of cinema since as early as the silent era, and the genre has become a mainstay in the diets of those seeking thrills on the big screen. Over the years, horror movies have become a noteworthy cultural phenomenon. Works such as *The Exorcist* and *Nosferatu* are considered classics in the world of cinema. Characters like Freddy Kruger and Hannibal Lecter have become icons in their own right. Hollywood has fallen in love with its monstrous darlings and the many unwitting teens and quiet countrysides they terrorize. All of this is thanks to the visionary directors and hardworking film crews that pour their creative passion into scaring the daylights

out of those in front of the screen. While convincing acting and ghoulish costumes are generally critical to a movie's success, often it's the music that's responsible for transforming the fictional fear of the characters into the very real fear of their audience.

Shrieking violins heralding an unexpected death, cacophonous percussion as the protagonist flees a ravenous beast, or a quiet, out of place lullaby are a few specific sounds that might jump to mind when thinking about the music of horror films. These sounds occur time and time again in horror cinema for a simple reason: they're scary. When it comes to horror music, there are several specific compositional tactics commonly used by film composers to elicit distinct emotional reactions of fear, tension, and surprise from the audience.

However, while such musical gestures are commonplace now, this wasn't always the case. Horror movies from the early 20th century, for instance, sound completely different than what we might expect from one in the modern-day. Horror music has evolved, and there are a few specific, popular films whose soundtracks play keystone roles in shaping the horror movie landscape around them. In this paper, I will survey several popular horror films to discuss and analyze the ways in which horror soundtracks have changed over time. Ultimately, I find that music in horror films is an ever-unfolding art form that is always looking for novel ways to frighten and unsettle its audience, and that several recognizable musical tropes are used and reused by composers writing for horror films. It is the way that these themes are utilized, established, and subverted that heightens an audience's emotional response, and grants them a deeper sense of fear.

To better evaluate the musical qualities typical to modern-day horror movies, it's critical to understand horror cinema at its earliest roots. By recognizing the methods and intentions of

the earliest film composers writing for horror movies, we can understand how the composers of the generations afterward were influenced in their work. However, this is made somewhat difficult by the fact that some of the earliest horror movies to hold mainstream success were created during the silent era. Because these movies had no recorded audio of any kind, historical archives of this music are spotty at best. F. W. Murnau's classic film *Nosferatu*, for instance, was fully scored by composer Hans Erdmann, but the music has since been almost entirely lost to time (Ginell). Yet, other films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, or Arthur Lubin's *The Phantom of the Opera* have scores that have survived until this day and suggest a common trend of horror films during their era. The Edward Ward wrote the original score for *The Phantom of the Opera*, which, while featuring original orchestral music, also heavily utilized pieces from Tchaikovsky and Chopin during its opera scenes (*The Phantom of The Opera* 14:04-0:16:09). Similarly, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, had no original score at all, instead choosing to repurpose several pieces from composers like Schoenberg, Debussy, and Stravinsky (Melnick 194). Even in the earliest examples of horror cinema, two distinct musical qualities have begun to take shape: the use of orchestral instrumentation and the reuse of music from outside sources.

The end of the 1920s marked the end of the silent film. Now with the means to record and sync music and audio to their work, directors had a new sensory dimension to manipulate. Rouben Mamoulian's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was a box office hit, but despite the novelty of its talkative actors, its score falls in line with its predecessors from the silent era by repurposing famous pieces of classical music, this time from the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Iconically,

an orchestral arrangement of Bach's "Toccata and Fugue in D minor" is used during the opening credits of the film, setting a sufficiently dreary mood (*Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* 0:00-1:06).

*King Kong* was to suffer a similar fate. Its composer, Max Steiner, was originally instructed to compile a soundtrack of reused music. However, co-director Merian C. Cooper was dissatisfied with this, electing to pay Steiner \$50,000 out of pocket to compose an original soundtrack for the film (Burlingame). With this, Steiner made history, marking *King Kong* as the first feature-length American talkie to have an entirely original score. Its soundtrack was performed by a 46-piece orchestra and took inspiration from opera music (Price). Not unlike an opera, *King Kong*'s runtime was filled almost entirely with music. Dialogue heavy scenes between the human cast members are treated with quiet, contemplative strings and woodwinds, while the island's monsters are heralded with bombastic timpani and brass. This is heard in Steiner's use of leitmotifs, such as Kong's sinister, descending three-note theme (*King Kong* 1:33:03-1:33:55).

Orchestral instrumentation, thrilling compositions, and simple leitmotifs were the keys to Steiner's success, and other composers took note. Two years later *Bride of Frankenstein* was the blockbuster horror to beat. A sequel to the 1931 film *Frankenstein*, director James Whale takes the helm once more to deliver the next chapter in the story of Frankenstein's monster. Despite the fact this film takes place immediately after the events of the previous movie, the difference in presentation between the two films is clear from the moment it begins. Whereas *Frankenstein* was completely devoid of music (save for its credits), *Bride of Frankenstein* was filled to the brim with Franz Waxman's grisly compositions. Just like *King Kong*, an orchestra of musicians was tasked with bringing the music to life. Action-packed scenes, like the monster's escape from

the townsfolk in the forest, were underpinned with soaring trumpets and chugging strings, escalating in volume and intensity as his hunters capture him (*Bride of Frankenstein* 28:07-28:57). Interpersonal moments, like when Frankenstein's monster befriends a blind man, are highlighted with an organ and violin duet of "Ave Maria" (*Bride of Frankenstein* 38:00-40:37). Additionally, three separate leitmotifs are established: a short, dissonant, and unresolved chord series for the monster; a syncopated, tonally ambiguous melody for the nefarious Dr. Pretorious; and an uplifting, romantic theme for the bride herself (McClelland 5-7).

With *King Kong* and *Bride of Frankenstein* achieving recognition as both critical and financial successes, the musical foundation for horror movies was set for future directors. Classic horror films like George Waggner's *The Wolf Man*, Jack Arnold's *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and Terence Fisher's *Dracula* all featured full, dynamic orchestral scores, and operatic leitmotifs. For almost three decades, this template of horror film composition remained largely uniform. Directors and composers imitated the success of the films that came before them. It wasn't until the year 1960 when a new sort of terror was thrust into the spotlight.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* was a great turning point in the horror film genre for a multitude of reasons. At the time, it was both praised and lambasted for its gratuitous depictions of violence, the likes of which had never before been seen in cinema and tested the censorship boundaries of its time. The cinematography and pacing prioritized tension and unease, and the film ultimately granted Hitchcock the title "Master of Suspense." It shocked audiences with its narrative twists and contained within it some of the most iconic scenes in movie history (Robb). The movie was an instant classic and is often named as one of Hitchcock's finest works.

However, while the film's success ultimately boils down to his skill as a director, in the words of Hitchcock himself, "33% of the effect of *Psycho* was due to the music" (Husarik 142).

Bernard Hermann, a frequent collaborator of Hitchcock's, was the composer responsible for that music. Hermann was working on an extremely limited budget, and, because of this, he only had enough money to hire a small string ensemble, a far cry from the large studio orchestras typical for cinema at the time. Hermann used this limitation to his advantage, however, deciding to do away entirely from the opera-inspired formula of the past for a soundtrack based upon contemporary experimental music.

The otherness of *Psycho*'s score is made clear from the very beginning. The audience is greeted with sharp, dissonant stabs from the string section, pursued by a rapid, pulsating theme that accompanies the opening credits. This aggressive, chromatic melody falls away to a more calm, contemplative soundscape as an establishing shot of a city is shown, before completely fading away as the dialogue begins. (*Psycho* 0:28-3:30) Notably, *Psycho*'s first act features little music at all, and when music does appear, like the scene where Marion pockets the cash and flees, it's quiet and filled with a sense of foreboding tension. (*Psycho* 11:05-13:00) This focus on silence and subtlety is a huge departure from the decades of established film scoring convention that came previously. However, nothing was more instrumental in reshaping the horror film genre as much as *Psycho*'s most famous scene.

Marion Crane's death wasn't simply frightening, it was bewildering. The person who the film, up until this point, has established as the main character was suddenly and violently murdered in the shower in what has become one of the most iconic death scenes in all of cinema history. Perhaps more iconic than Marion's death is the music that accompanies it. The violins



strike with repetitious, high-pitched cluster chords played with a short, upward glissando (*Psycho* 46:45-48:45). This is a jarring contrast to the more reserved music that came before it and is a classic example of what is known colloquially as a “jump scare” (Bishop). This cinematic technique became far more popular in the 1980s. However, the use of it almost two whole decades prior makes *Psycho* stand out as a proving ground for its effectiveness at impacting an audience. Although Hitchcock and Hermann assuredly were not conscious of this at the time, this sort of non-linear, atonal shrieking sound triggers a natural, psychological distress response humans are naturally averse to (Connor).

The importance of *Psycho*’s score in the world of horror cinema can not be understated. Hermann had succeeded in turning what was at its core a limitation of money and time into a uniquely gripping and provocative composition. With *Psycho*’s critical and commercial success other composers were quickly taking note, and we would soon see other composers adapt the techniques Hermann used for their own compositions. Soon, the days of fully orchestrated, operatic horror music would be gone. With *Psycho*, a new kind of horror soundtrack had been created. One that prized silence, smaller instrumentation, quiet anticipation, and raucous atonalism.

This change didn’t happen overnight, however. Movies like Roger Corman’s cinematic adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Pit and The Pendulum* retained a musically dense, operatic style of composition. Despite this, composer Les Baxter nevertheless gave his score a quieter, eerier sound than the horror films that audiences were used to, something he was praised for at the time (Thompson). *Psycho*’s influence can be felt in small ways throughout this soundtrack, however, the film’s final, climactic moment is where this influence is laid bare. As our

protagonists flee the dungeon they were trapped and almost killed in, the camera suddenly whips around, revealing in a shocking twist that one of their friends is trapped inside an iron maiden. This revelation is proclaimed with sudden blaring horns, thumping timpani, and a familiar-sounding ascending string stabs. Using *Psycho*'s shower scene as a template, the jumpscare was beginning to appear more and more in horror cinema. (*The Pit and the Pendulum* 1:17:45-1:18:05)

Also becoming an established staple of the genre was atonal, experimental music, and *The Exorcist* had this in spades. William Friedkin's famous 1973 film about a priest's fight to cure a possessed little girl features an appropriately demonic sounding soundtrack that showcases an original score by Jack Nitzsche as well as music repurposed from outside sources. Famously, Mike Oldfield's "Tubular Bells" sets the mood as our protagonist makes her way home (*The Exorcist* 15:25-16:15). This song, the title track of Oldfield's recently released progressive rock album became synonymous with *The Exorcist*, and with the horror genre as a whole. "The Exorcist Theme" as many have dubbed it, is played in a harmonically consonant sounding aeolian mode but with an asymmetrical 15/8 time signature, which gives the melody a rushing, off-kilter type of energy. This is in stark contrast to the other repurposed piece of music used throughout *The Exorcist*: "Polymorphia" by Krzysztof Penderecki. This modern experimental piece instructs a 48 piece string ensemble through graphic notation to play through three movements of thick tone clusters and experimental playing techniques, such as striking the strings with a palm of the hand or tapping the wooden body with the bow. The result, true to its name, is a morphing, highly varied, densely layered piece of entirely atonal and arrhythmic music. While neither Oldfield nor Penderecki wrote these pieces with horror films in mind, nor

even the intention of frightening their listeners, the success of both *The Exorcist* and *Psycho* solidified this sort of experimentalism with the sound of horror films in the minds of moviegoers worldwide.

While *The Exorcist* can safely claim one of the most popular themes in horror cinema, none up to this point will be as well-known as what composer John Williams has written for Steven Spielberg's smash hit, *Jaws*. In typical John Williams fashion, *Jaws* sports a highly melodic and upbeat soundtrack fully orchestrated and fit for a seafaring adventure. In many ways, William's score is reminiscent of the kind of dramatic, opera-inspired music of early horror cinema. Chief among this older style of horror music composition is William's use of a leitmotif, the famous, two-note, chromatic chugging that accompanies every scene in which the titular *Jaws* appears. *Jaws*'s theme is notable not just for its popularity within our culture, but also for how it's used inside of the film. This theme, slowly building in intensity and severity, act as a sort of telegraph. It's as if the pounding E and F notes are warning the audience that a monster is near even when that monster itself is hardly even visible, such as in the iconic "Get out of the water!" scene where *Jaws* first makes itself known to the beach-dwelling public (*Jaws* 16:40-17:50).

When looking at horror films in the '70s, it's clear that a significant shift in the standards and expectations of horror music composition was taking place. The music in horror films was becoming more modern and experimental, and movies like *The Omen* with its focus on Latin chants with demonic lyrics, or *Suspira* whose score places heavy emphasis on progressive rock styles. It might be difficult to keep track of just how many ways horror films have changed in

this decade alone. Despite this, if there was one film that perfectly encapsulates and implements all of these newly evolved traits, it would be Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*.

This adaptation of Steven King's classic novel about a father losing his mind and attempting to murder his family in an isolated hotel, despite its initial mixed reviews, is now considered by many to be a masterpiece of horror cinema. From its captivating cinematography, surreal narrative, and striking performances from its small cast, the film is so tightly constructed, it might initially seem as if the soundtrack was constructed especially for it. In fact, like many of Kubrick's films, *The Shining*'s soundtrack repurposes music from a number of composers including Bela Bartok, Gyorgy Ligeti, and several pieces from Krzysztof Penderecki. Like many horror films of its time, Kubrick, and the man responsible for arranging the soundtrack, Gordon Stainforth, elected to use avant-garde and experimental pieces of contemporary music in *The Shining*. In fact, like *The Exorcist* just a few years before, *The Shining* also makes heavy use of Penderecki's piece "Polymorphia."

It's more than just the type of music used in *The Shining* that's important, it's also how it's utilized. As was commonplace during the time, music was quite sparse throughout most of the film but was slowly built in presence and ferocity as the father, Jack Torrance, grows more and more unstable. Stainforth perfectly encapsulated the core of his vision when he said "the music had to be 'over the top'... Anything less would not have been true to the underlying manic quality of the movie as the madness unfolds towards the end" (Barham 11).

Since Stainforth attempts to achieve this kind of emotional impact by way of previously written compositions, he has to carefully edit the timing of each scene to fit the music. Take the scene where Jack's wife Wendy discovers his typewriter, and the box of manic, repetitive

rambling he's been typing since his family arrived at the hotel. As Wendy enters the hall, baseball bat in hand, calling for her husband, the score is silent. Slowly, as she approaches the table, a low, grinding tone can be faintly heard, increasing in volume with every step. The second sound cue, high pitched cluster chords and wandering glissandos, come in as she turns to the box itself. More and more instruments are introduced, becoming more frenzied and less coherent along with Jack's text. As the camera peers around the corner, the music quiets without any apparent reason. This is a perfect example of the frequent use of telegraphing common within this film, and horror cinema in general by *The Shining*'s release. The audience senses a change, consciously or passively, and understands that something bad is about to happen, even if they don't know quite what it is yet.

The answer comes quickly as Jack steps into frame. For only a moment, the music drops to almost complete silence, as if the musicians themselves are taken by surprise. Then, a crackling pizzicato establishes a new mood as Jack announces his presence. This same sort of precise timing is used multiple times as Jack and Wendy engage in an incredibly tense conversation. Jack asks "What are you doing down here?" and the music stops completely. He slaps his hand down on the manuscript to the dissonant attack of a string section. These percussive strikes meld into ambiguous noise as the scene flashes between the couple, their son, and a dreamlike shot of two elevators unleashing a torrent of blood. Finally, as the argument takes a violent turn, Wendy strikes Jack with the bat, mirrored by two stabs from the string section, and finally, shrieking violins as Jack tumbles down the staircase. (*The Shining* 1:41:18-1:49:34)

It's this kind of care and attention to detail that makes *The Shining* a sparkling exemplar of this new style of horror film soundtrack. Despite the music being inherently atonal and arrhythmic, the timing and flow of each piece are meticulously applied to each scene to give a precise temperament of tension and surprise. Notably, Stainforth even mixes multiple tracks on top of one another to add to the cacophony. With certain sections of the maze theme having three separate sections of Penderecki's "Kanon" overlayed with his other piece "De Natura Sonoris No.2" (Barham 15).

What makes *The Shining*'s score even more impressive is how it bridges the gap between horror soundtracks of the past with horror soundtracks yet to come. Regarding the past, take for instance the scene where Dick Hallorann, a man with psychic abilities, searches through the hotel for Wendy and her son Danny, before being struck down by Jack with an axe to the tune of *Psycho*-esque percussion strikes. A clear homage to Hermann's massively influential musical work, alongside Hitchcock's gut-wrenching narrative twists (*The Shining* 2:07:40-2:08:50). However, *The Shining* doesn't just reflect on the past but also looks to the future, and it does so from a much more unexpected place: its opening credits. The only original piece of music written specifically for *The Shining* is Wendy Carlos's rendition of the traditional gregorian chant "Dies Irae," played entirely on a synthesizer. (*The Shining* 0:14-3:00).

There is a hidden theme underpinning horror movies released after *Psycho* such as the zombie flick *Night of the Living Dead*, supernatural thriller *Carrie*, and cult classic *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. All of these films made a massive splash in the box office while spending only a fraction of what their competition did on production (Cunnane). Low-budget horror films were all the rage, and savvy directors were beginning to take note that spending big was

unnecessary when it came to delivering big scares. Just as Hermann terrified his audience in the '60s with only a small string section, composers heading into the '80s would do the same with the synthesizer.

The first film to truly successfully pull this off was John Carpenter's classic slasher flick *Halloween*. Being on a tight budget of \$300,000, Carpenter not only didn't have the means to hire an orchestra, but he also couldn't even hire a composer, instead electing to write the entire film's score himself over the course of just three days (Grieving). Assisted by his friend Dan Wyman, a music professor at San Jose State University, Carpenter crafted a minimalist force of nature using only a piano and a synthesizer. In many ways, *Halloween's* soundtrack is similar to its predecessors, and Carpenter openly speaks about being inspired by films such as *Psycho* and *Susperia* (Grow). *Halloween's* title theme should sound familiar to anyone who has heard *The Exorcist*. The rapid, consistent piano notes, playing in a consonant aeolian mode, with an odd 5/4 time signature bears a striking resemblance to Oldfield's "Tubular Bells" (*Halloween* 00:03-02:10). Furthermore, like Dracula, Jaws, and so many other classic horror villains, *Halloween's* murderous antagonist Michael Myers has his own leitmotif: a single, unsettling, electronic wail (*Halloween* 16:42-17:38). This sort of minimalist approach in both composition and instrumentation represents a new breed of horror soundtrack that will sweep through the 1980s like wildfire.

Profit is, of course, the primary reason behind this change. To put in perspective the kind of turnaround these inexpensive horror movies make, it's important to look at the other movies competing at the box-office during this time. In 1978, the year *Halloween* was released, academy-award-winning *Heaven Can Wait* also hit the big screen. With a budget of \$15 million,

it was a huge success, earning \$81 million in the box office and gaining over 5 times the amount it spent (*Heaven Can Wait* Box Office Information). Coincidentally, 1978 also happens to be the year *Superman* was released, touted as the most expensive movie yet made with a budget of \$55 million. It made back an exorbitant \$300 million, again earning more than 5 times its cost (*Superman* ((1978)) Box Office Information). *Halloween*, as stated previously, cost a mere \$300,000 to produce, but made a profit of \$70 million worldwide, reaping over 230 times its budget (*Halloween* ((1978)) Financial Information). With returns on investment like that, it's not hard to imagine why the movie industry became intrigued with low risk, high reward horror films.

*Phantasm* was an early adopter of this kind of scoring technique. Director Don Coscarelli's science fantasy horror film's soundtrack was brought to life by composer Fred Myrow and his synthesizer. His compositions are moody and dreamlike, and his main theme (a repetitive melody with even rhythm played on a piano in an aeolian mode) might give the attentive listener a sense of déjà vu (*Phantasm* 10:45-11:57). Michael Mann's film *The Keep* follows a group of Nazi soldiers who awaken a malevolent being in an intriguing genre blend of war film and surreal horror. Notably, the soundtrack was composed by the German electronic music band Tangerine Dream who construct a suitably psychedelic soundscape, which uniquely utilizes a vocoder during certain climactic scenes (*The Keep* 1:24:45-1:26:51). Other popular films at the time, such as *The Boogeyman*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Day of the Dead* were constructed entirely with synthesizers and drum machines. It's all too easy to dismiss these works as "cheap," because, to put it simply, that is what they are intended to be. However, what's perhaps most inspiring about this era of horror movie soundtracks is the ability for



composers to use the limited tools provided to them to manifest their artistic vision, and transform this limitation into a wholly unique and captivating work of creative ingenuity.

David Cronenberg's cult classic body horror film *Videodrome* is a prime example of this kind of ingenuity. Following a man named Max, the sleazy CEO of a Canadian television company, *Videodrome* is a mesmerizing bit of satire that tackles the general public's fear of graphic sex and violence being showcased in true, unadulterated Cronenberg fashion: by turning the main character into a fleshy cyborg-monster. Howard Shore, a close friend and frequent collaborator of Cronenberg's, was in charge of composing the music for this film, and as was typical of the time, did so using a synthesizer. However, Shore uniquely opted to incorporate a small, live string section into his compositions as well. Shore wrote the score on a Synclavier II digital synthesizer, then recorded the same composition with the live string section. During the first act of the film, only the live strings are audible (*Videodrome* 22:20-23:50). However, as the film continues, and Max's body and mind become more and more corrupted by the malicious technology around him, the soundtrack mirrors his transformation (Shankar 31). Tones from the synthesizer are subtly brought into the mix, transforming the once clean acoustic string ensemble into a murky, nebulous blend of organic and electronic instruments (*Videodrome* 1:02:40-1:06:10).

Historically, the synthesizers and string instruments were selected for much the same reason. After all, *Psycho* was scored with a string ensemble because, while it was more cost-effective than the alternative, it was still an arrangement of instruments that had a wide range of dynamics, multitudes of tones, and tight cohesion. What made this style instrumentation so popular in the '70s, is exactly what made synths so popular in the '80s. Skipping forward a

bit, because strings and synths were so heavily utilized in horror films of the late 20th century, they have since become ubiquitous with the aesthetic of horror films and are still quite prevalent to this very day. However, there are still some techniques composers have only begun applying since the turn of the century that are worth mentioning.

One such technique is the out-of-place utilization of “happy” music. There are plenty of instances where calming, or serene sounding music has been used in horror films throughout their history. Often, this is used as a way to offer the audience brief respite from the tension and scares that occupy the rest of the film’s runtime. This can be seen during many of the films previously mentioned in this essay, such as the heartwarming scene between Frankenstein’s Monster and the blind man during *Bride of Frankenstein* where “Ave Maria” is played (*Bride of Frankenstein* 38:00-40:37). It can also be seen in *The Shining* when Jack Torrence hallucinates a previously empty ballroom filled with cheerful guests, and live jazz music (*The Shining* 1:22:25-1:25:30). Even slasher flicks like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* took small reprieves from it’s raucous, musique concrete style score to soothe it’s listeners with soft folk music every once and awhile, such as when our protagonist Sally flees from her captors to a gas station she presumes is safe (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* 57:00-58:00). However, it’s a relatively new phenomenon that this kind of calming music is played with a sense of irony.

Despite a few instances like this happening during the ‘80s and ‘90s, this type of ironic juxtaposition hits its stride during the beginning of the 21st century. Mary Harron’s *American Psycho* contains a whimsical episode of musical irony within its first act. After a Christmas party, the titular “psycho,” Patrick Bateman draws a coworker to his apartment, where he begins

espousing his appreciation for the band Huey Lewis and the News before murdering his coworker with an axe to their song “Hip to be Square” (*American Psycho* 26:52-29:16).

Zack Snyder’s film *Dawn of the Dead* employs musical irony for a much bleaker effect. During the film’s opening credits, several quick cuts of newsreel detail the rapid collapse of society when the dead begin to resurrect as bloodthirsty zombies. Playing behind the chaos is Johnny Cash’s song “The Man Comes Around,” a folk song referencing the horsemen of the apocalypse, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the divine judgment he will bring upon all mankind (*Dawn of the Dead* 10:39-.13:12).

Often enough, these bits of musical irony are simply used to be surreal and creepy. In *Insidious*, for example, after several long scenes of tension and fear, Josh, our protagonist, enters the demon’s lair to find his son chained to the floor. After freeing him, the two of them look upwards to see the demon sharpening his claws on a grindstone while a phonograph plays Tiny Tim’s “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” (*Insidious* 1:24:51-1:25:30). Regardless of the intended effect, the utilization of commercial music in this way is an interesting, modern take on the everpresent horror movie tradition of repurposing previously established music to suit the need of the film. Ultimately, that sentiment is exactly the position modern-day horror movie music is in. With the advent of the internet, and the ability to easily view and learn from horror films of the past, it’s common for horror movie composers to utilize and reinterpret formulas that worked in the past to their work today.

Synthesizers remain a commonly found instrument in horror movies released today. Previously, synths were used as a necessity to produce soundtracks on a budget, but with modern technology that limitation no longer exists. Still, soundtracks like the one in David Robert

Mitchell's '80s-inspired throwback *It Follows* used a digital software to recreate the nostalgic sounds of analog synthesizers of that era. The composer himself, Disasterpeace, even cites the work of John Carpenter as a direct inspiration for many of the pieces used in his soundtrack, even going so far as to use Carpenter's music as temp tracks (Disasterpeace). Even Carpenter himself is still hard at work creating synth-based horror film scores. *Halloween*, a franchise now eleven films deep, has John Carpenter reprising his role as the film's composer in its 2018 installment, alongside his son Cody Carpenter, and Daniel Davies, a friend, and long-time collaborator.

Meanwhile, there are a plethora of examples of both the harsh atonality of the '70s and more subdued, consonant melodies of the '80s to be found in modern films. Trent Reznor's soundtrack for Susanne Bier's hit Netflix release *Bird Box* utilizes both Reznor's signature solemn piano compositions, as well as abrasive, electronic sound clusters not unlike the music of Penderecki (*Bird Box* 12:16-15:00). Other films, like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* composer John Murphy creates a melodic, but hollow atmosphere suitable to the film's empty landscape (*28 Days Later* 9:00-13:15). Movies like Wes Craven's *Scream* see an even earlier return to form, with Marco Beltrami, the film's composer, emulating the likes of *King Kong*, and creating a colorfully orchestrated, and musically dense experience (*Scream* 28:00-30:50)

This isn't to say that modern horror music is simply retreading old territory with no newly created techniques to call their own. For example, modern technology has granted composers the ability to easily create sub-bass and infrasound effects, both of which are often subtly implemented throughout modern horror films in a way that was not feasible in the past.

Look to Oren Peli's hallmark low-budget thrill ride, *Paranormal Activity*, where quiet sub-bass comprises the film's entire soundtrack (*Paranormal Activity* 54:00-56:20).

Ultimately, when surveying Horror films as a whole, the metamorphosis that has taken place over the past century or so of musicianship is undeniable. Although every composer tackled their film with the same goal, to frighten their audience, each one achieved that goal in different ways. These musicians adapted and evolved to changing tastes and newly emerging technology, and their work evolved with them. From the bombastic, opera inspired music of the early 20th century, to the experimental atonalism of the 70s, to the droning synths of the 80s, and the nostalgia-fueled conglomeration of all these traits found in modern-day compositions, the ballad of the horror genre is long and multi-faceted. Yet, it is not over. There is no reason to believe that this is the end of the story for horror music, modern-day horror films are by no means a perfect art. As long as there are visionary filmmakers prepared to create new monsters to terrify their audience, there will be visionary composers waiting to give those monsters a theme song.

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